

Air Force and Scientists Differ on ABM Issue

By George C. Wilson
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"A nearly perfect operational defense against ballistic missiles appears to be in the technical cards within the next 10 years or less," according to an article in the new issue of Air Force Association magazine.

"American scientists must do all in their power to prevent the U.S. Government from unthinking commitment to a new arms race started by Russian deployment of an anti-ballistic-missile system," the editor of the "Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists" said yesterday.

These contrasting stands are new indications of the widening split in and outside the Government on the ABM issue.

The poles of opinion within the Government are Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara—who wants to rely on offensive missiles rather than defensive ones—and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who consider an ABM system part and parcel of U.S. deterrence.

The thesis of the Air Force Association article, just published, is that it is no longer safe to assume that the offense will always stay ahead of the defense.

J. S. Butz Jr., technical editor of the association's "Air Force/Space Digest," writes in the March issue that U.S. ICBMs and Polaris missiles "could become obsolescent more quickly than any major system of the past."

He said U.S. estimates about what kind of energy would be released when a 100-megaton

bomb was exploded in space "have been grossly in error."

Butz, an aeronautical engineer who has specialized in weapons reporting, said in an interview that nuclear scientists, who declined to be identified, were his source for that statement about miscalculation. He wrote that giant explosions in the 100-megaton class "give off more than 1000 times more high energy particles than expected."

With such high energy radiation, Butz said, large weapons could be exploded in space to put up a protective belt. "It is believed in some quarters," he wrote, that such a belt "would be powerful enough to turn the most heavily shielded ICBM warhead into a dud." He said the belt could remain lethal to warheads for "possibly an hour."

The idea, under this technique, would be to put up such a belt as soon as it was learned that an enemy had launched a barrage of missiles.

Butz wrote that new reconnaissance equipment threatens to make Polaris missile submarines even more vulnerable. He said that with such equipment satellites may be able to see submarines even when they are "several hundred feet" deep in the ocean.

In its editorial taking the opposite tack, the "Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists" said "it is quite possible" that information about Russian ABM progress — "either genuinely believed or artificially spread by vested interests"—may be just as inaccurate as that which triggered charges of an ICBM "missile gap."